



A BREAKFAST CONVERSATION WITH FORMER
PRIME MINISTER EHUD OLMERT

Peacemaking in Wartime

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Group



On Sunday, November 15, participants took part in a discussion with former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Considerable attention was given to the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian peace track, with the point being made that Israel sees Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as a partner for peace, but believes he has yet to take certain necessary steps. In addition, the same point that was made the previous day—that there is no alternative to making progress on the peace track—was stressed again.

The session began with a discussion of missed opportunities during the tenure of Ehud Olmert, with an Israeli participant saying that Abu Mazen has yet to respond to a comprehensive peace offer made by Olmert. It came up in the discussion that Olmert had met with Abu Mazen thirty-five times for in-depth talks, with Olmert outlining a detailed peace plan and presenting a map. In addition, the Olmert plan included Israeli concessions, such as having the Holy Basin governed by five nations—Israel, Palestine, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. However, it was argued that despite this presentation to the Palestinians, no Palestinian response or counteroffer was given.

An Israeli participant said that the Obama administration should “start from the end.” In other words, while American presidents have been committed to solving the conflict, there has been a tendency for each new administration to come into office and start from scratch and discount the progress made by previous administrations. This trend has had the unfortunate effect of rolling back the progress that had been made. Therefore, President Obama should start where things left off—namely, by addressing the Olmert plan and asking the Palestinian side to respond to this plan.

The issue of “practicality” was discussed, with some agreement that Israel must address the conflict from a



practical, not ideological standpoint. In other words, even if some Israelis dismiss the Palestinians' claim to the land, these Israelis must still acknowledge that demographics make forging an agreement critical to the security and identity of Israel.

One participant raised the issue of whether the Israeli public would be willing to support a peace agreement, particularly given talk about how Israel's political left has disappeared in recent years. In response, an Israeli offered a statement made by the first Israeli prime minister, David Ben Gurion, that a prime minister cannot be certain about what the public wants, but can be certain about what the public needs. Therefore, any Israeli prime minister should act according to what is in the best interest of the country, not according to what he or she thinks the public mood is at that moment.

Many participants expressed strong support for Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, and were impressed with the progress he has made on economic and security matters. An Israeli said that those who look for excuses could find fault in some of what Fayyad had done, but Israelis and Americans should not take for granted the real progress he has made. For instance, the participant said that there is daily security coordination among Israelis and Palestinians, which has been vital in turning Jenin, a city that only five years ago was a hotbed of terrorism, into a model for stability and security.

Regarding negotiations with Syria, an Israeli participant suggested that any Israeli prime minister who enters talks with Syria must first come to terms with withdrawing from the Golan Heights. If he or she is not willing to do this, he or she should not initiate talks because doing so would be more damaging than not having talks. On the flip side, Syria should only enter talks if it has come to terms with breaking relations with Iran. An Israeli said that many people underestimate Bashar al-Assad, but he is firmly in control of Syria. In addition, he has shown restraint because there were many situations when he could have lashed out violently but did not. Several participants supported this point, saying that Assad is capable of being a partner for peace, and it is therefore time to discuss the specifics of a peace deal with him.